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Casualty Aversion: Implications for Policy Makers and Senior Military Officers

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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## Abstract of

### Casualty Aversion: Implications for Policy Makers and Senior Military Officers

As the only remaining superpower, the United States has adopted a strategy of engagement to preserve our vital interests. Engagement depends on the instrument of military power, but our status as a superpower is challenged based on the perception a casualty-averse public limits our ability to intervene using military force.

Research shows casualty aversion does not determine public support for military operations. The public weighs the costs of military interventions with the benefits and prospects for success and makes a decision with the aid of cues from political leaders. The conventional wisdom that the public is casualty averse is wrong, but civilian policy makers and military elites still act on the mistaken assumption the public will no longer accept the risks of military action.

By attributing casualty aversion to the public, civilian and military elites have masked their own aversion to casualties and threatened our status as a superpower. Casualty aversion on the part of civilian leaders renders coercive diplomacy ineffective and undermines deterrence. Casualty aversion on the part of senior military leaders limits bold options and aggressive plans and destroys the military ethos. The misinterpretation of public casualty aversion by policy makers and senior military leaders undermines our strategy of engagement.

## Introduction

The events of the last one hundred years have witnessed dramatic changes in American foreign policy, and, in particular, the use of force in support of national objectives. From a sleeping giant with overt isolationist tendencies prior to World War II, the United States has evolved at the beginning of the 21st century into the world's only superpower. The transition from a body politic wedded to the charge of George Washington's farewell address that we should avoid "entangling alliances" to a recognized superpower with global interests and responsibilities has been marked by the commitment of the United States to stand up for its values and principles with military might. Military might, in combination with other elements of national power, defeated Nazism and Japanese hegemony in World War II and hastened the end of the Cold War, which saw the collapse of Soviet-dominated communism and global bipolar confrontation.

The end of the Cold War, however, unleashed an uncertain world that has not developed into a new world order or seen the end of conflicts. Challenges to the interests of the United States and free people around the world remain, and the United States is currently positioned as the only nation with the global capabilities and power to provide leadership for an uncertain future. As stated in *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, "Our nation's challenge--and our responsibility--is to sustain that role by harnessing the forces of global integration for the benefit of our own people and people around the world."<sup>1</sup> In order to meet these challenges and remain the "world's most powerful force for peace, prosperity and the universal values of democracy and freedom" that the President's strategy champions,<sup>2</sup> the United States has to show leadership in an anarchical world by acting like a great power.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of global communism, many have challenged the ability of the United States to maintain its position as the world leader. The conventional wisdom is the United States is unwilling to commit the military power required to influence events, settle disputes and be the force for democracy, peace, and economic freedom that our national strategy promulgates. The perception among our enemies and allies alike is the American public is unwilling to commit to any military operation where even a minimal number of casualties can be expected. Furthermore, it is believed that once engaged the United States can be forced to withdraw from its commitments when American casualties mount. Casualty aversion is a symptom that in the eyes of the world we are becoming in the words of one researcher, "a sawdust superpower."<sup>3</sup>

In light of the changing environment in which military and security policy is conducted, the Triangle Institute for Strategic Studies (TISS) recently conducted a study on Civil-Military relations. As part of that study, several scholars studied casualty aversion and concluded the American public is far more tolerant of potential casualties than policy makers or senior military officers. In a *Washington Post* article, two of the principle TISS researchers stated that the common belief that the American public demands "a casualty-free victory as the price of supporting any military intervention abroad" is a myth.<sup>4</sup>

If true, the TISS findings have significant implications. Is there a casualty aversion syndrome? And if so, what are the implications for policy makers and senior military commanders? In the broadest sense these are the issues this paper will examine. Far from being contradictory to previous research, TISS data is consistent with a body of research, that when examined, sheds a different light on the casualty aversion equation. By examining the existing body of research this paper will argue that policy makers and senior military leaders

have misinterpreted the public's casualty tolerance, and their incorrect view of casualty aversion has an adverse impact on national security and military operations.

### **Casualties and Public Opinion**

Do our civilian and military leaders have a sound case for believing that public opinion is linked to the number of casualties suffered in a military operation? Several RAND studies have examined this issue by consolidating available research and drawing conclusions based on the data. The first significant report in 1985 used Korea and Vietnam as case studies and examined several different bodies of existing research.<sup>5</sup> Looking at the overall decline of public support over time in Korea and Vietnam, Mueller concluded that public support in both wars "behaved in a remarkably similar manner: Every time U.S. casualties went up by a factor of ten, support in both wars decreased by approximately 15 percent."<sup>6</sup> Likewise, research by Milstein looked at public support for Vietnam as compared to the cumulative costs of the war and concluded, "The most significant costs to the American people were the number of American boys killed and wounded in Vietnam..."<sup>7</sup> Finally, Kernell analyzed monthly casualty rates and found that "a strong negative correlation (-.68) was shown to exist between monthly casualty rates and president Truman's popularity in the Korean War."<sup>8</sup> In a companion finding he showed that President Johnson's popularity was negatively correlated to the monthly number of Americans killed in action and the number of bombing sorties over Vietnam.<sup>9</sup>

The research documented in this RAND study concluded that the public was sensitive to casualties and gradually withdrew its support from the military operations in Korea and Vietnam based on the cumulative number of casualties. A significant contextual point was

made of the limited war environment in which these conflicts took place. Analysis of the data by RAND researchers led to the conclusion, "The public tends to be unwilling to tolerate anything more than minimal costs in limited war situations."<sup>10</sup> From this perspective it is easy to discern the roots of casualty aversion syndrome, and were this the only research, it would be difficult to refute the common belief among our policy makers, senior military leaders, allies, and enemies that casualty aversion is the Achilles' heel of the United States. Several key variables, however, were not addressed in this study, including: the reason there was support for relatively high casualties for a significant length of time, the impact of public disapproval on alternative courses of action, and the impact of other variables that could have influenced public opinion.

Another RAND study by Schwarz in 1994 dealt with the question of alternative courses of action the public may have supported in the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf Wars.<sup>11</sup> This report analyzed the earlier study's conclusions that the American public is casualty averse, and postulated that the perceived casualty aversion impacted regional deterrent strategies. If adversaries believe that America can be defeated or forced to withdraw from a military intervention by imposing casualties on U.S. forces, "then they are unlikely to be deterred by U.S. threats to intervene."<sup>12</sup> This fear was realized prior the Gulf War when Saddam Hussein was undeterred and boasted to the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq on 25 July 1990 "about Iraq's readiness to fight any foe over honor, 'regardless of the cost,' while America, unable to stomach '10,000 dead in one battle' was incapable of pursuing a major war to a successful conclusion."<sup>13</sup> Saddam was wrong, but the perception of the American public being casualty averse negatively impacted our ability to deter a potential foe.

This significant impact, led Schwarz to search for the golden nugget which would overcome this problem, and he found it in an alternative course of action the public preferred. He contends that the public became "disillusioned" with America's participation in Korea and Vietnam and regretted the decision to intervene, but actually rejected withdrawal in favor of escalation of the conflicts. He states, "There was, however, very little movement in the percentage of Americans polled who wished the United States to withdraw from the conflict. In fact, a growing number of Americans favored escalation of the conflicts to bring them to a quick--and victorious--end."<sup>14</sup> This assertion was backed up by selective polling data that showed that majorities of Americans supported escalation over withdrawal in Korea and Vietnam and preferred escalation of U.S. war aims in the Gulf to include the removal of Saddam from power. Clearly out to prove a point, this often-quoted research, has been relegated to an extreme with more recent comprehensive reports analyzing casualty aversion in greater depth. The current and most significant studies of recent years fall between the views that the public is hopelessly casualty averse or ruthless in their quest for escalation and vengeance.

In 1996 Larson completed a comprehensive study under the auspices of the RAND Corporation, which attempted to explain the disparity between the research conducted to date.<sup>15</sup> He examined the results of public opinion polls taken from World War II through the military intervention in Somalia and sought to determine if other variables accounted for the differences in support documented in U.S. military interventions. The conventional wisdom, alluded to earlier, is the American public has changed since World War II and will no longer accept interventions that produce casualties. A perceived corollary is that Americans will demand immediate withdrawal when casualties mount during operations. Larson took on



these issues by developing a model that explains the public support for military interventions in terms of a broader context.

Larson determined the best way to discover the linkage between casualties and the public support is through a model that weighs the dynamics of support within a simple calculation of ends and means. In this model, the public bases its support for an intervention after a rational consideration of five factors:

- The perceived benefits of the intervention.
- The prospects for success.
- Prospective and actual costs.
- Changing expectations, and
- Leadership and cueing from political leaders.<sup>16</sup>

This simple calculus captures the many variables that interact to produce public support.

Using this approach “support can be thought of as a constant rebalancing of the benefits and prospects for success against the likely and actual costs--and a determination of whether the outcome is judged worth the costs....”<sup>17</sup>

This model of ends and means is embedded within the concept of a democratic conversation. The argument, supported by research, states that “political leaders lead the democratic conversation, the political discourse...is observed and reported by the media, as members of the public are exposed to these messages, attitudes change in a predictable fashion.”<sup>18</sup> This does not imply that the public are pawns in the hands of the wily politicians, but rather the public takes cues from political leaders whom they find credible and who have a similar worldview or political ideology. “In short, individuals ultimately choose which arguments are most credible but use a shortcut that reduces their information-gathering costs.”<sup>19</sup> The implication is public casualty aversion does not drive support for military interventions. The public is able to rationally discern the merits of each individual case and

make an informed determination of support based on expectations, benefits, prospects and costs.

Using these conceptual frameworks Larson determined that the American public has not become more casualty averse since World War II. Indeed, Americans have always had a high regard for human life but that regard has been balanced within a continuous cost-benefit analysis that ultimately determines support. It is only logical that increasing costs in terms of casualties will result in a decline in public support unless that cost is offset by an increase in the benefits or prospects for success. This explains the differences in support for various interventions since World War II and also explains the general decrease in support over time as casualties mount in a particular operation. The RAND study states:

Less well understood, however, is the fact that the importance of casualties to support has varied greatly across operations; when important interests and principles have been at stake, the public has been willing to tolerate rather high casualties. In short, when we take into account the importance of the perceived benefits, the evidence of a recent decline in the willingness of the public to tolerate casualties appears rather thin.<sup>20</sup>

World War II is seen as a departure point when casualty aversion is mentioned because of the extremely high levels of support despite enormous losses.

**US Personnel Killed in Action<sup>21</sup>**

<u>Conflict</u>	<u>Total KIA</u>
World War II	291,557
Korea	33,651
Vietnam	47,364
Grenada	16
Panama	24
Persian Gulf	293

In light of these casualty figures, World War II appears to be an exception--in some way different from the limited conflicts of the Cold War and recent interventions which were

characterized by a decline in support as the costs increased. In fact, the nearly consistent public support despite dramatically rising casualties in 1944 and 1945 can be attributed to the increasing prospects for victory based on battlefield accomplishments in Europe and the Pacific, the benefits of unconditional surrender, and near unanimous political support from both parties. "In short, as the costs increased, these costs were compensated by increasing war aims and prospects for success."<sup>22</sup>

Likewise, polling data from Korea and Vietnam support the assertion that the public weighed the merits of each intervention using a cost-benefit analysis. Both wars started with a significant level of support based on the important U.S. interest of "containing communist expansion" and both conflicts "contained the risk of a dramatic increase in costs if there were to be an expansion of the war to involve China or Russia."<sup>23</sup> In Korea support increased as the prospects for success rose after Inchon and the benefits were expanded to include a unified peninsula. Conversely, after the Chinese intervention support declined based on dimming prospects for gains beyond the status quo. As a stalemate developed, political opposition increased and public support declined. The 1996 RAND study noted that while the costs, casualties, were important in declining support, "their influence cannot be untangled from these other factors."<sup>24</sup>

Vietnam also mirrors the ends and means calculus reflected in support for the Korean War. The dwindling prospects for success as the war continued, the decrease in the perceived benefit of containing communism in light détente and improving relations with China, and the dramatic division among political leaders all led to decreasing support for the war. Casualties, while important, were not the sole determinant of public support as commonly portrayed. Interestingly, the similar public support between Korea and Vietnam was reflected in 1965

polls that indicated less than 40 percent of the public thought Vietnam was worth Korea-level casualties. Larson points out, however, that the prospective support actually seems “to have underestimated slightly the willingness of the public to tolerate casualties”<sup>25</sup> and deems it “remarkable that the Johnson and Nixon administrations were able to continue prosecuting the war so long....”<sup>26</sup> This supports the refutation of the conventional wisdom that the American public will demand immediate withdrawal when casualties rise.

In both Korea and Vietnam, America continued the struggle long after support for the interventions had declined below fifty percent. There was no consensus demand for immediate withdrawal or escalation to victory. What happened? In essence, the American public weighed the ends and means and supported a policy of negotiated settlement and orderly withdrawal. Larson points out that only minorities supported the extreme positions of immediate withdrawal or escalation, “while pluralities or majorities (‘the Silent Majority’) occupied a centrist position.”<sup>27</sup>

If Korea and Vietnam fit within the framework of ends and means, the democratic conversation, and lucid public decisions regarding support for military interventions, then Somalia becomes the chief evidence of those who proclaim the public, swayed by CNN, will cut and run at the first sign of blood. While analyzing the “CNN Effect” is beyond the scope of this paper, detailed research indicates that rather than setting the agenda, CNN reports responded to the actions of the White House, Congress and the State Department<sup>28</sup> in a manner consistent with the democratic conversation.

The death of 18 U.S. soldiers in October 1993 is commonly seen as the event that caused the public to demand immediate withdrawal. This view misses the fact that support had already collapsed *before* the firefight in Mogadishu with only 40 percent of the public

supporting the operation.<sup>29</sup> The changing expectations caused by the shift in mission focus from the popular humanitarian objectives to nation building and warlord hunting, combined with Congressional “cues” against the operation (both houses of Congress passed nonbinding resolutions calling on the president to articulate his objectives and exit strategy in September 1993)<sup>30</sup> had already doomed the intervention. Larson states:

In fact, Somalia represents another case in which the historical record suggests a more sensible and subtle response to increasing casualties and declining support: A plurality or majority has typically rejected both extreme options of escalation and immediate withdrawal and has remained unwilling to withdraw until a negotiated settlement and orderly withdrawal--including the return of U.S. servicemen--could be concluded.<sup>31</sup>

In summary, recent research supports the contention that the public does not demand bloodless interventions as the starting point for securing national interests and exercising world leadership as articulated in our *National Security Strategy*. The public has consistently operated within the realm of an ends and means evaluation with significant cues from political leaders who frame the public debate.

### The Casualty Myth

If the public is not casualty averse as the evidence suggests, the focus turns to the misinterpretation of this fact by our national security leadership. The TISS study provides strong evidence that policy makers and senior military leaders believe the American public is casualty averse and will not tolerate deaths except when vital interests are at stake. This conclusion was reached by posing three plausible intervention scenarios to the general public, influential civilian leaders, and senior military officers and asking them to consider how many American deaths would be acceptable to complete each mission. The three military missions

were: defend Taiwan against a Chinese invasion, prevent Iraq from acquiring weapons of mass destruction, and stabilize a democratic government in the Congo.

**Number of Deaths Acceptable<sup>32</sup>**

<u>Mission</u>	<u>Military Elite</u>	<u>Civilian Elite</u>	<u>Mass Public</u>
Congo	284	484	6,861
Iraq	6,016	19,045	29,853
Taiwan	17,425	17,554	20,172

As the authors point out these averages must be interpreted in general terms and do not necessarily reflect the actual casualties the public will accept once real soldiers start dying, but the “sheer numbers” and “dramatic differences” between the groups are significant.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, they are consistent with the previous research that explains public support in terms of ends and means and the democratic conversation. The Taiwan case is a holdover from the Cold War and represents deep-rooted American sentiment for the Nationalist Chinese and the “long-standing commitment to defend Taiwan.”<sup>34</sup> Many Americans associate defending Taiwan with resisting Communism and defending democracy—links that go back to Cold War and World War II and are considered, if not vital, very important national interests. It is not surprising, therefore, to find consensus on the costs all three groups are willing to accept to accomplish the mission.

The Iraq and Congo cases are examples of the post-Cold War interventions that have sparked the contention that the American public is casualty averse. The Iraq case is significant because it demonstrates the effectiveness of leadership and cueing from public leaders. Civilian elites were willing to accept over three times as many deaths as military elites. The democratic conversation model predicts that when there is broad-based support from civilian leaders, public opinion will be influenced. The extremely large number of deaths the public indicated they would be willing to accept is consistent with the democratic conversation

concept--even given the fact a direct link between civilian leaders and the public was not implied in the reported results from TISS. Feaver and Gelpi postulate the public's willingness to accept more casualties in Iraq than Taiwan "may reflect lingering traces of successful Bush-Clinton efforts to demonize Saddam Hussein combined with Clinton's attempts to pursue a conciliatory policy toward China."<sup>35</sup> This rationale is also consistent with the premise that the public is influenced and aided by cues from public leaders. The fact that right-center and left-center ideologues from the general public received similar anti-Saddam cues from Bush and Clinton supports the role of leadership in the ends and means model.

The Congo scenario arguably encompasses the least vital interests of the three prospective interventions. It is likewise consistent with RAND research that predicts the public will tolerate fewer casualties if the benefits and prospects are not as great. The data show the public would only tolerate roughly one third to one fourth as many deaths when compared to the Taiwan and Iraq averages, but the point must not be missed that the public was willing to accept *over 6,800 deaths* to accomplish the mission. The researchers stated, "The public's estimates for the mission to restore democracy in Congo were much lower, but were nonetheless substantial. In fact, they were many times higher than the actual casualties suffered by the U.S. military in all post-Cold War military actions combined."<sup>36</sup> The cumulative weight of evidence provided by TISS research is consistent with past public opinion on the role of casualties in prospective or actual conflict, and supports the contention that policy makers and senior military leaders have attributed to the public an aversion of casualties that does not, in fact, exist. The number of deaths the public indicated they were willing to accept was, in all cases, more than civilian and military elites. The magnitude of the disparity, as mentioned earlier, has implications for national security and military operations.

### Implications for Policy Makers

Our current national security strategy calls for engagement in the international arena and the use of economic, diplomatic, informational, and military instruments of national power to shape an environment with multiple centers of regional power.<sup>37</sup> In the absence of Cold War-type threats to our national existence, engagement is an attempt by our civilian leadership to prevent the development of pariah states, such as Germany and Japan after World War I, and reduce the potential for a multifaceted conflict with a nuclear-armed power. These goals are threatened, however, not by a lack of national resources, but by the casualty aversion myth working among our policy makers and senior military leaders.

The perception among civilian elites, the policy makers who determine national strategy, that the public is casualty averse hinders coercive diplomacy and limits military options in support of our national strategy. In fact, Nathan argues in *The Rise and Decline of Coercive Statecraft* that Clausewitz has been turned “on his head” and the “current policy theory reverses the Clausewitzian insistence of the supremacy of policy over any autonomous logic attendant to arms.”<sup>38</sup> Nathan contends policy makers have surrendered to the Weinberger Doctrine and Powell restrictions on the use of force, and the military has an effective veto over policy options that fall short of vital interests. This flies in the face of a security strategy that champions engagement at a level significantly below vital interests in order to shape the international environment. The effort to shape the environment specifically calls for military actions to prevent vital interests from being challenged in the first place.

Nathan contends U.S. diplomacy is enfeebled when our policy makers are unwilling to use force to back up diplomacy and states, “Without a credible capability to use moderate force, fate rather than statecraft determines the future.”<sup>39</sup> When statecraft is seen as weak due



to the lack of a "big stick," tyrants remain undeterred. In 1994 a Serbian official commented on the potential introduction of peacekeepers into Bosnia by saying, "Clinton has his own problems...He can't afford to have even a few soldiers killed in Bosnia."<sup>40</sup> Statements made by our political leaders or actions they take, which demonstrate an unfounded casualty aversion based on the myth of a weak-kneed public, weaken coercive diplomacy and embolden future adversaries. The result is deterrence crumbles and military forces will have to be used to contain Saddam, Milosevic, or the next bully who refuses to heed diplomatic warnings.

An even potentially worse scenario than our enemies not being deterred is the potential for policy makers to abandon military force when its use is required. Lorell and Kelley comment:

In the future, a President may elect to delay or forgo direct U.S. military intervention in a Third World conflict--even though it may be needed to defend legitimate U.S. interests--because of concern that public support may decline or collapse once the United States is deeply committed.<sup>41</sup>

This fear of casualties among our political leaders encourages renegade world leaders to take risks based on the potential that their actions will skirt under the threshold of U.S. interests which would illicit a response. If they are successful, engagement is weakened and other rogue groups are likely to test U.S. resolve in areas closer to vital interests. This does not imply that the United States must respond to every disturbance in world harmony, but rather the decision to respond should be based upon our national security strategy and not upon the myth of casualty aversion.

### **Implications for Senior Military Leaders**

As noted earlier in the reported results from the TISS study, senior military leaders exhibit an intolerance for casualties that far exceeds the number of deaths the public would accept and tolerate significantly fewer losses than policy makers in typical post-Cold War interventions. The notion of senior military leaders having an unrealistic and excessive view of casualty aversion has widespread implications for military planning and the military ethos. The Goldwater-Nichols Act codified joint warfighting and gave immense responsibility to senior military leaders, especially the warfighting CINCs. This responsibility, if tainted by a belief that military action must be casualty free, can have the unintended consequence of shifting the burden of risk to the people our military mission says we should protect.

There are, of course, legitimate reasons for military leaders to tolerate or accept fewer casualties than the public or political leaders. As Feaver and Gelpi point out, it is entirely rational for “military officers to give lower casualty estimates for nontraditional missions,” when “they do not believe those missions are vital to the national interest.”<sup>42</sup> Military leaders adhere to the principle of economy of force and do not want to fritter away limited assets on missions that might detract from the ultimate mission of defeating vital threats to national security. The danger, as mentioned earlier, is military leaders will trump civilian policy and in a bout of self interest “deter” missions which are essential building blocks in the national strategy of engagement.

It is also true that military commanders care about their troops and do not want to waste lives. The conviction that fewer casualties are warranted may indicate there are better ways to fight than the World War I saga of frontal attacks. Most agree that effective planning and asymmetric strategies, which apply American technological strengths to enemy weaknesses,

should be maximized to dislocate, confuse and defeat an enemy,<sup>43</sup> but these should not be used as a panacea because of a mistaken belief that the mission must be risk free. As one author stated, "Reduced casualties have always been a goal of a good commander. Yet stating this as an absolute requirement that can be fulfilled by our advanced technology simply ignores the true nature of mankind and war."<sup>44</sup> The argument is not that commanders should avoid unnecessary casualties--duty demands no less--the issue is the impact excessive casualty aversion has on planning and the military ethos.

Deliberate planning at the theater strategic and operational levels of war is the domain of the warfighting CINCs. If, as this paper argues, senior military leaders are casualty averse or erroneously believe the American public will not accept losses, this process can be skewed and produce plans that fall short of their intended purpose. The Vietnam legacy for senior officers is a belief that American lives "were needlessly lost" and a determination "to avoid putting military personnel at risk unless absolutely necessary."<sup>45</sup> The Gulf War corollary states that the American public will not tolerate future operations that promise more than a "handful of casualties."<sup>46</sup> Geographic CINCs and their senior staff officers produce theater engagement plans, write commander's estimates of the situation, and provide courses of action to the national command authority, which are impacted by these legacies. Casualty aversion on the part of senior officers or the erroneous perception that the public demands casualty-free interventions can produce a self-limiting filter or paradigm through which all plans must pass. One wonders whether Inchon would be possible today or if the plan would be found "not acceptable" due to excessive risk?

A potentially greater threat posed by excessive casualty aversion is the destruction of the military ethos. Feaver and Gelpi highlight the views of Donald Snider, a retired Army colonel

and West Point professor, who argues the military ethic "is built on the principles of self-sacrifice and mission accomplishment. Troops are supposed to be willing to die so that civilians do not have to."<sup>47</sup> Dunlap agrees, "Uniformed professionals need to ask themselves whether the military's altruistic ethos, axiomatic to its organizational culture, is being replaced by an occupationalism that places—perhaps unconsciously—undue weight on self-preservation over mission accomplishment."<sup>48</sup> The degrading impact of casualty aversion can best be seen in excessive force protection, which shifts mission risk from the U.S. military to others.

The on-going operations in Kosovo provide an insightful case study on the impact casualty aversion has on mission accomplishment and the military ethic. In a positive example, Lt Col Bruce Gandy, a Marine battalion commander, wrote an article in the *Marine Corps Gazette* describing his units' successful operations in Kosovo. His unit filled the vacuum left by retreating Serbian forces and provided security for the local population. He described the mission by saying, "Although we minimized risk wherever we could, we quickly realized force protection cannot be paramount. First and foremost is the mission. Marines must always answer the call to arms no matter what the cost."<sup>49</sup>

The Marines accomplished the mission by decentralizing operations and giving companies control of individual sectors. Companies lived in the areas for which they were responsible, and the company commander acted as the police chief and civil administrator. These decentralized operations quickly gained the trust of the local population, but they were not without risks. Gandy states, "Decentralization while projecting a visible presence is not without risk. Marines are taught to seize the initiative. In peace enforcement operations, this means exposing our Marines and sailors to danger."<sup>50</sup>

In contrast to the mission-focused approach of the Marines, the follow-on Army forces are plagued by excessive force protection and casualty aversion run amuck. In an attempt to drive the casualty rate to zero, the U.S military is building an isolated, multi-million dollar compound to provide a comfortable, secure environment. Allied soldiers, who live among the people as the Marines did previously, ridicule the compound and call it "Disneyland."<sup>51</sup> The brigade responsible for one fourth of Kosovo in its mission statement lists its foremost objective as "self-protection" while other "peacekeeping tasks, such as maintaining 'a safe and secure environment' and...building a civil society receive lesser priority."<sup>52</sup> It is not surprising the brigade lists self protection as its first objective given the fact the Army's European Command "holds that its primary objective is 'To Protect and Take Care of the Force.'"<sup>53</sup>

The compound in Kosovo is not the issue. The problem is casualty-averse military leaders have determined that risk avoidance takes precedence over the mission given by American and NATO policy makers and have shifted the risk to our NATO allies and the people of Kosovo. If presence in one sector declines, all of the adjacent areas are in greater danger and the people in that sector are at greater risk for reprisals. Even if civilian deaths do not increase, the greatest casualty is the military ethos—the warrior ethic of service before self, willingness to sacrifice for the society we protect, and the responsibility to minimize risk to those it is our mission to protect. Excessive casualty aversion by senior military leaders does not accurately reflect the view of the American public, and instead of protecting the force, may actually be sowing the seeds of its destruction.

## Conclusion

The Cold War is over and the world is still a dangerous place. American national security interests are no longer defined by the bipolar confrontation with the Soviet Union, and the threats to our national security are more subtle and hard to describe. As the only remaining superpower, the United States has embarked on the path of engagement—exercising active, decisive leadership in world economics and diplomacy to make the world a more prosperous and democratic entity. By engaging on many levels where our interests are less than vital, our strategy seeks to preserve our vital interests and status as a superpower.

In a world without a governing authority, however, our ability to engage and resist those who do not share our vision of freedom and prosperity depends on the instrument of military power. At present the United States has the best and most dominate armed forces the world has ever seen; but dictators, terrorists, and allies challenge our status as a superpower based on the perception a casualty-averse public limits our ability to wield military power.

Research shows the public is not an irrational mass calling for immediate withdrawal from military interventions at the first news reports showing American deaths. Instead the public weighs the expected and actual costs with the benefits and prospects for success and makes a decision with the aid of cues from political leaders. Public support is not all encompassing, but can be counted on when civilian leadership adequately frames the debate in terms of a positive ends and means calculation. The conventional wisdom that the public is casualty averse is wrong, but civilian policy makers and military elites still act on the mistaken assumption the public will no longer accept the risks of military action.

By attributing casualty aversion to the public, civilian and military elites have masked their own aversion to casualties and threatened our status as a superpower. Casualty aversion

on the part of civilian leaders renders coercive diplomacy ineffective and undermines deterrence. Casualty aversion on the part of senior military leaders becomes a filter that limits bold options and aggressive plans and insidiously destroys the military ethos. The misinterpretation of public casualty aversion by policy makers and senior military leaders hurts our foreign policy and military credibility. A casualty aversion myth "is hardly sound footing for American foreign policy"<sup>54</sup> and supporting military operations.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> White House, *A National Security Strategy For A New Century* (Washington D.C., 1998), iii.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Mark J. Conversino, "Sawdust Superpower: Perceptions of U.S. Casualty Tolerance in the Post-Gulf War Era," *Strategic Review* (Winter 1997): 22.
- <sup>4</sup> Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, "A Look at Casualty Aversion; How Many Deaths are Acceptable? A Surprising Answer," *Washington Post*, 7 November 1999, sec. B, p. 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Mark Lorell, Charles Kelley, Jr., with Deborah Hensler, *Casualties, Public Opinion, and Presidential Policy During the Vietnam War* (Santa Monica, Ca.: RAND Corporation, 1985), 1-92, R-3060-AF.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., 21.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 23.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., vii.
- <sup>11</sup> Benjamin C. Schwarz, *Casualties, Public Opinion, & U.S. Military Intervention* (Santa Monica, Ca.: RAND Corporation, 1994), 1-27, MR-431-A/AF.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 4.
- <sup>13</sup> Conversino, 17.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., ix.
- <sup>15</sup> Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1996), 1-126, MR-726-RC.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 10-12; idem, "Ends and Means in the Democratic Conversation: Understanding the Role of Casualties in Support of U.S. Military Operations" (Ph. D. diss., RAND Graduate School, 1996), 320.
- <sup>17</sup> Larson, *Casualties and Consensus*, 12.



<sup>18</sup> Larson, "Ends and Means," 267.

<sup>19</sup> Larson, *Casualties and Consensus*, 75.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>21</sup> Figures taken from Karl W. Eikenberry, "Take No Casualties," *Parameters* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 113.

<sup>22</sup> Larson, "Ends and Means," 167.

<sup>23</sup> Larson, *Casualties and Consensus*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>25</sup> Larson, "Ends and Means," 204.

<sup>26</sup> Larson, *Casualties and Consensus*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>28</sup> Larson, "Ends and Means," 245-251.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Larson, *Casualties and Consensus*, 72.

<sup>32</sup> Feaver and Gelpi, B3.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> White House, 1.

<sup>38</sup> James Nathan, "The Rise & Decline of Coercive Statecraft," *Proceedings* (October 1995): 61-62.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>40</sup> Roger Thurow, "Serbs Bet That West Won't Risk The Thing They Fear: Ground Troops," *Wall Street Journal*, 21 April 1994, sec. A, p. 10. Quoted in James Nathan, "The Rise & Decline of Coercive Statecraft," *Proceedings* (October 1995): 63.

<sup>41</sup> Lorell and Kelley, iii.

<sup>42</sup> Feaver and Gelpi, B3.

<sup>43</sup> An excellent discussion of asymmetric air power strategies. Ronald R. Fogelman, "Advantage USA: Air Power and Asymmetric Force Strategy," *Air Power History* 42, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 5-13.

<sup>44</sup> Conversino, 21.

<sup>45</sup> Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., "Organizational Change and the New Technologies of War," (Paper Presented at the Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics, Washington D.C., January 1998), 9. <<http://www.usafa.af.mil/jscope/JSCOPE98/Dunlap98.htm>> (7 January 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Conversino, 21.

<sup>47</sup> Feaver and Gelpi, B3.

<sup>48</sup> Dunlap, 10.

<sup>49</sup> Bruce A. Gandy, "Force Protection and Mission Accomplishment," *Marine Corps Gazette* 83, no. 11 (November 1999): 44.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>51</sup> Jeffrey Smith, "A GI's Home Is His Fortress; High-Security, High-Comfort U.S. Base in Kosovo Stirs Controversy," *Washington Post*, 5 October 1999, sec. A, p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Jonathan Foreman, "The Casualty Myth," *National Review*, 3 May 1999, 40.

<sup>54</sup> Feaver and Gelpi, B3.

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